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THE CONFERENCE FOR EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH

By the President of the Conference, ROBERT C. OGDEN, New York City

Originally, membership in the Conference for Education in the South was limited to the list of guests invited to share the hospitality of Captain Sale, at Capon Springs, West Virginia. The only present qualifications needed by a delegate consist in personal presence and sympathetic accord. Thus the Conference is a purely voluntary association. It has had a healthful and continuous growth without a constitution, and has thus proven its ideal nature, human temper and intellectual quality. It has illustrated the possibilities of the brotherhood of man by electing executive officers and committees with no by-laws to restrict, with perfect freedom for unlimited overwork, and the right—by appeals to altruism, to patriotism, or fear—to impress into the service of the Conference all whose assistance may be required.

By this gentle brigandage the Conference has lived and moved and had its being. Cordially appropriating the generous hospitality of locality after locality, piling boundless cares upon local committees, placing upon its chief officers responsibilities broad as the tenderness of conscience or capacity for initiative; trusting as the birds trust the hand that providentially feeds them, a treasurer without an exchequer; appropriating for the use of the executive committee the whole American republic of letters that a proper program should annually be presented—the Conference has gone forward from grace to grace, and from strength to strength.

Quite likely the inorganic character of the Conference has inspired the expression of doubt concerning its serious purpose. Intimations have not been wanting that it is only a junketing affair, a sort of fad which the imaginations of certain very good people have translated into a supposed vitality and force, a solemn fancy that affords a sober excuse for an affair primarily social, incidentally educational. Suggestions of this nature originate quite beyond the circle that have personal knowledge of the facts. Certainly the social environment of the successive meetings has been important and useful, as it has been delightful, yet it is completely subordinate and incidental.

Nevertheless, the inquiry is legitimate: "What is the theory of the Conference?" The reply is clear and sharply defined: "The Conference exists for the advancement and promotion of the education of all the people." A brief analysis of the elements of the Conference may clarify this answer.

All are perfectly familiar with the sovereign demands—material, intellectual, spiritual—of educational interests. Executive combinations of many sorts—land, buildings, taxation, legislation, systems, methods—are under requisition for the service. Its infinite details increasingly enlist the unremitting toil of hundreds of thousands of painstaking teachers, men and women, representing every grade of instruction from the simplest to the most abstruse.

For the moment, in the centre and foreground of this vast perspective, stands the Conference—a composite aggregation of men and women, interesting because so varied in its personnel.

Some are profoundly ignorant of the technicalities of education, quite unfamiliar by personal knowledge with even the recitation rooms or the methods of contemporary school life. Others are within the sacred fraternity of teachers, and in the group may be found representatives of every rank in the teaching profession. Still others are charged with the official responsibility of educational management on behalf of the state or corporate bodies. But all are with one accord in one place—officials and citizens, professionals and laity—by reason of a common belief in the beneficent power of education, and because each distinct element is essential to the spirit that must vitalize the Conference.

So much for the personnel.

The solvent, the fusing power that creates the common point of contact, is the belief, perceived in varying degrees by all present, that the great social duty of our age is the saving of society and, further, that the salvation of society begins with the saving of the child. Without faith in the moral progress of the world we are hopeless indeed. This progress begins with the little child, and therefore, in a very liberal sense, we are to-day under the leadership of childhood. From the kindergarten of to-day to the university of to-morrow is, as the years go by, a very short step.

At this time no apology is needed for the claims that the saving of society, the progressive betterment of humanity, is demanded by Divine authority, manifested through the living pur-

pose clearly revealed in Holy Writ, providential guidance and human consciousness. Neither should excuse be asked for insistence that a clear, definite and exacting special demand is made upon every man and woman for personal service—self-sacrificing, devoted—in all things having to do with the creation and promotion of human knowledge as a means of human happiness.

So much for the moral inspiration of the Conference.

Continuing the inquiry a step further, we notice that, from the foundation of our government until now, ringing out with true tone and clarion voice, rising resonant and distinct above the clamor of politics—above the loud barking of the dogs of war, above the harsh controversies concerning the nature of the national federation, above the strident debates upon the ethics of domestic institutions—the note of democracy in catholic unison has ever resounded dominant and universal. Democracy is a national intuition, the fundamental political doctrine of every American worthy of the name, the sacred trust confided to our care and keeping, to be preserved for the healing of the nations through a complete demonstration of its truth upon American soil. Thus, in a very special way, our political institutions unfold an inspired mission that deeply concerns the moral progress of the world. Thus the state should become the universal missionary of a political gospel both at home and abroad.

But a true democracy can only exist through the fidelity of its citizens. Individualism—cynical, selfish, cold and indifferent—cries out: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” “Who is my neighbor?” A true democracy quickly echoes back: “Thy brother is he that hath need of thee.” “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

There is a divinity in democracy; in society as in the individual there is personal and organic spiritual life. Witness the restless longing for social service that marks the serious side of present-day life in America. So much for the patriotic inspiration of the Conference.

And thus it has come about that this varied collection of men and women, moved by ethical and patriotic incentives, have come from remote localities that they may be mutually instructed and inspired in a conference based upon the common belief that the general education of all the people is essential to the salvation of society; that without general education, progress in the arts, in

the diffusion of happiness, in the things that make for good character, family peace, clean living, human brotherhood, civic righteousness and national justice is impossible. In the atmosphere of a common human sympathy the Conference for Education in the South lives and moves and has its being.

The concrete reply concerning the theory of the Conference is short and simple. It is a diminutive spiritual democracy—a sympathetic association of those who believe in the civic and constructive value of the policy of universal education. It exists for the cultivation of the higher inspiration that underlies all social development. It firmly believes that successful practical effort is the product of sound ethics.

And yet the Conference is not a transcendental body, existing in the assumed superiority of a self-created atmosphere of indefinite and mysterious supremacy. Therefore, as action is the expression of doctrine, as methods are the formulæ of beliefs, so the discussion of practical educational questions naturally affords the means for the cultivation of the true ideal of the Conference.

The province of pedagogy has rarely been touched, never invaded, by the proceedings of the Conference. That great and important side of educational progress is too technical and detailed for the time at command, and, belonging to the strictly professional side of educational administration, could not be profitably considered in a body so generally representative as the Conference. It is therefore naturally eliminated.

There is, however, a vast sphere in which the Conference may now, and for long years to come, find ample scope for thought and discussion.

Legislative action has expressed the will of the people upon many topics that need larger light, public opinion as yet unexpressed in law lengthens the schedule, and individual minds find still other questions in education that may well challenge the consideration of philanthropists, philosophers and statesmen. These fertile sources have supplied the program that the executive committee presents for the guidance of the deliberations.

The absolute need of universal education has the endorsement of the law of each of the United States of America and the conscientious allegiance of all intelligent citizens.

Local taxation for education has the sanction of law in many

states. Negro education is recognized as a part of the public educational system in every state, both South and North. The education of every child in our country is an admitted national duty, and leading minds find in this principle broad ground for a demand that the national government should share with the several states, in proportion to the need, the financial responsibility involved in the discharge of that obligation. The moral accountability of the higher institutions of learning to the cause of popular public education, and the economic value of education to material progress, are great subjects that have the affirmative approval of the highest intelligence.

Within the limitation of its orderly program the Conference is an open forum. Reasoning from previous practice, its function is inspiration by discussion rather than decision. Resolutions have never been its vogue. Its conclusions have been enshrined in individual thought and not voiced in the vote of a majority.

This natural practice is a direct evolution from the underlying circumstances that made the Conference possible. It is deeply interesting to note in this connection that the originators of the Conference did not know the extent of the forces with which they were dealing, nor the greatness of the power they were calling into being. The one all-controlling fact before the minds of the fathers of the Conference was the appalling need of an educational awakening in the rural South. Who that heard will ever forget the graphic utterances of Dr. Curry and President Wilson, of Washington and Lee University, in which, with words hot from well-furnished minds and glowing hearts, they reviewed the causes of educational backwardness and pictured the then existing need? Later there came the comprehensive statistical and descriptive addresses and papers presented to the Conference by members of the Southern Education Board, that gave cumulative testimony to prevailing conditions and needs. So earnest and drastic were these utterances that it would seem ungracious to repeat them now. But the impassioned expressions of these leaders voiced the longing, anxious appeal of many earnest and intelligent men and women that, in the seclusion of remote, obscure and wide-lying communities, had pondered upon the way to improve educational conditions and prayed long and earnestly for the means of relief. A vast amount of the seed of the Kingdom was growing secretly. These were the conditions that awaited the coming of the Conference. At the

beginning it touched only a few of these faithful souls, but now, by its direct action and by other agencies that its spirit has called into being, the fellowship is increasing and bringing forth abundant fruit.

The intrusion of disagreement into a domain of thought and sentiment so vast and so sacred would seem to be sacrilege. Thus the natural life of the Conference has been that of unity and agreement. The standing ground of common need is so broad, the truly vital point so evident and so eminent, as to forbid discussion; points of difference are so minor and inconsequent that perfect accord has been natural—any other condition would be contradictory to the best humanity here in conference assembled.

It is fundamentally impossible to hold the Southern Education Board and the General Education Board officially responsible for this Conference. In a full and complete sense they are only accountable to the donors of the money by which they are supported. In a very broad and positive sense they are responsible for their action to intelligent public opinion. In a sentimental and sympathetic sense they are so interesting to the Conference that this discussion demands reference to them, and the paper would be incomplete without some account of their doings. And yet it should be positively understood and insisted upon, until the interested public comes fully to understand, that the Conference and the boards are absolutely and entirely distinct.

The Southern Education Board carries on a crusade for education. Its organization is comprehensive and actively covers the larger part of the country from the Potomac to the Rio Grande, from the Ohio to the Gulf. Its large expenses are privately defrayed. The General Education Board administers such funds as may come to it for the assistance of education. In this connection they cannot be considered separately—their work is a unit; they are the halves of a complete sphere; they are interdependent, subjectively and objectively. Seven men are members in both boards.

At the office of the General Education Board in New York, under the direction of Dr. Buttrick, a vast amount of information is being accumulated and tabulated concerning schools and educational institutions in the various states covered by the operations of the boards. From the bureau of information, under the direc-

tion of Dr. Dabney, at Knoxville, Tennessee, a great mass of popular and statistical literature has been circulated to the newspaper press and to individuals. Assistance has been extended to various schools and institutions, divided nearly equally between the races. Various summer schools for teachers have been encouraged and assisted, none entirely supported. Certain counties in several states have been encouraged to improve the public schools by subscription and local taxation, by the duplication of funds thus raised by the General Education Board. These experiments display the possibilities of self-help. State conferences of county superintendents of education have been held, with highly satisfactory results, in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Florida and Louisiana. Others will follow, and probably the usefulness of the system will warrant its continuance.

It is also needful to remember that the Conference is essentially in control of the Southern delegates, and that such Northern official representation as exists has been in obedience to the unanimous demand of the Conference. In harmony with this feature of the Conference, all the members of the campaign committee, composed of the several district and bureau directors, of the Southern Education Board, are residents of Southern states. In addition, nine other prominent Southern men are representing the boards in various forms of activity.

We are a proud people. The vast resources, growth of wealth, increase of population, achievements of enterprise, tremendous material strides forward witnessed by recent years, appeal to the imagination with overwhelming force, and we are dazzled by the brilliance of the pageant as we are confused by its incomprehensible magnitude. I freely admit the blessings of commercialism and recognize, with a good, healthful spirit, that trade is the vanguard of civilization and the ally of education.

We are, indeed, a proud people. We boast of our civilization. We are vain of our national achievements in science, literature, the fine arts, education, philanthropy and social progress. There is an aristocracy of intellect and culture, as of money, and, in it all, self is the object of highest worship.

We should be an humble people. Are the wily arts of the demagogue, North or South, who finds in prejudice, produced by ignorance, the opportunity to serve himself through the triumph of that

which is false, a subject of pride? Is the prevalence of provincialism, urban or metropolitan (the latter the greater), which narrows the view to things local and selfish, a subject of pride? Is the heredity of ignorance, that transmits its baleful and growing blight from generation to generation, a subject of pride? Is the failure of law, North or South, to punish crime and the freedom of the criminal to prey upon society, a subject of pride? Is the arrogance and indifference of wealth to human need a subject of pride?

When we look fairly at the under side of things, with a good, honest purpose to know the truth, does not all our pride melt away, and does it not seem that, instead of boasting of our exalted civilization, we should confess with humiliation that we are just emerging from barbarism?

The Conference primarily owes its existence to a great class who have heard and obeyed the call to personal service. In the beginning it earnestly extended sympathy to teachers of every degree, and quickly came back a loyal response. From then until now the blessed tie that binds has been strengthened, and the reflex atmosphere of appreciation has encouraged the men and women from various other walks of life to remain in association with the Conference. But without the help of the teachers it would long since have expired.

Encouragement has also come from educational officials. The Conference and the boards have been in most delightful harmony with the governors of states, superintendents of education of states and cities, presidents of universities and colleges and trustees of many institutions. Thus the influences have been reciprocal and twice blessed.

It is a source of deep regret to me that I cannot present a full, graphic and complete picture of what has been doing in many and various fields of educational influence by the various agencies to which allusion has already been made. In some quarters there has been an impression that the Conference is a distributor of money, and people have come from distant points to present claims only to meet with disappointment. But, as a matter of fact, the Conference treasury is merely a vacancy, a figment of the imagination. The Southern Education Board is costly because its plans are large, but it is a dependent without a dollar of margin over its executive expense roll. The General Education

Board has had some money to use for the moderate encouragement of people and institutions to self-help. This partial repetition is made only to emphasize the fact that the great objective is the arousing of interest among all the people for the education of the children. And splendid have been some of the results. In certain states it has been a great awakening like an intellectual tidal wave, but, unlike such a wave, it will not recede leaving desolation in its track. In many states during the last year education has been the successful rival of politics in commanding public attention, and the same has been true of certain countries and neighborhoods that have taken independent and local action.

In some places it has been a single earnest person ; in others, the representatives of the boards, in others, state officials, in others, the combination of all these forces operating in different ways towards the same end. Despondency comes sometimes when the great gulf between need and relief is contemplated, but courage rises with a view of things accomplished.